The Teashop

Darryl Nevels

August 1, 2010

Introduction:

I wanted to experience something that I have thought about doing but never have. I have been to Pike Place Market many times since I have lived here in Washington and have always walked right by many of the teashops. Last weekend, specifically Saturday at around 1:00PM, I decided to try something new and sit down to a cup of tea at Vital T-Leaf, a medium sized teashop at 2003 Western Ave. #109 Seattle, WA. I will be including a start to finish account of my experience along with some of the traditional information and preparations of tea that I found very interesting.

Methodology:

I particularly did not choose this specific teashop it was somewhat by chance. I showed a minor interest in what was going on in the shop by peeking in and before I knew it I was being invited to sit down and have a cup of tea. I could not refuse the invitation due to a very heightened curiosity on my part. Although I quickly found out that this was a Chinese teashop, I have lived in the Far East as a child and remember my mother and I being invited to a Japanese teashop. She stressed the importance of proper behavior and respect for the culture. Armed with the experience of living in Japan I have a clear view that there is a distinct difference between Japanese and Chinese culture. Not because I have ever been to China and compare the two, but because while living in Japan I was often reminded by the locals of how different the two societies were. So, I took this knowledge and applied it to my present situation with the goal of discerning any differences between the two teashops and most importantly immersing myself in something other then my mundane regular Saturday.

Data Presentations and Analysis:

As I stated previously it was around 1:00 in the afternoon as my partner and I entered the teashop after being politely invited to have some tea and gestured with a wave to sit down. This is very similar to how I was shown to sit in Japan with the palm up and a gentle sway of the arm. We both sat down to a plethora of different sized tea pots ranging from ones made of what appeared to be clay and metal with delicate Chinese writing on them, to more modern plastic cylindrical ones that because of their clear exterior you could see their inner workings. It was first of all very impressive to see a mechanism for brewing that undoubtedly extracted the optimum flavor from the tea. A young Asian girl with an upbeat charm was our host and she presented us with a jasmine tea. She carefully place small cups in front of us with the use of what looked to be wooden tongs and started to cool the once boiling water poured from a teapot on a burner by swirling it. Our host said that jasmine tea is very delicate and must not be scalded. There was a slight language barrier due to our host's accent but she was very eager to share many aspects of the tea preparation with us. My experience so far was very similar to that from which I remember in Japan.

There were three other people on the other side of the counter where the tea was being served. One of them was an older gentleman who was dressed in what appeared to be traditional Chinese attire. He was helping another couple that was interesting in the more medicinal aspects of the tea being served. Our hostess then began to pour us a rose tea. There were literally little buds of pink roses in a small teapot that she showed us. She poured how water in the pot quickly closed it and poured water on top and let it flow down the sides. I noticed every time she used a particular pot that looked like this one; she always did the same thing. Now that I think of it, I did not ask if this was significant to the making of the tea or instead a cultural practice. As soon as we would drink our tea it was speedily replaced.

The next tea she presented us was much darker then the previous ones. This was what she described as an oolong tea and had the label Blue People. It was a mix of black and green teas. It was much sweeter then the previous teas and evidently when we inquired about the taste we were told it was spiked with ginseng. Yes she said spiked. I found this a bit amusing and we finished off all of the tea in the teapot. Our hostess cup after cup poured tea for us, and then she would pour for herself, and then we would all drink together. To be honest after three small cups of this tea I was starting to get a bit of a buzz and we all started laughing. It was almost like an unspoken presence of friendly happiness between our hostess and us.

I had one last inquiry to one of the teas labeled on the shelf of massive tea jars that was presented behind our host. It was called monkey pick. I asked what it was and how it tasted. She poured us all a cup and said that we would find a subtle flowery taste to it. She also said that the name originated from the monkeys that have been taught to pick the leaves from the top of a mountain in China because of how hard it is for people to get there. I found that quite amazing! The reason behind the flowery taste is because the tea grow next to these white flowers and the taste comes from the proximity of the growth. After a pot of this tea I felt it time to head on out because I had a killer caffeine buzz going on. Before I went though I had to get one of the cool clear brewing teapots and I purchased some Blue People. I really love that tea! We parted way and shook hands with our hostess named Becky. It was somewhat of a backwards introduction at the end of the meeting, but in the end an uplifting experience.

Cross-Cultural Comparison:

Conclusion:

In the end, this experience was very similar to that of my last teahouse experience just a different place, time, and a worldlier persona on my part. In hindsight there are many questions that I should have addressed mainly the straight up obvious one, what is the difference between Japanese and Chinese teas. Plus, I would like to know why Becky poured tea over the teapot and what the significance of some of the writing on the cups was.

I suppose that many of the things that happened could be explained or interpreted rather by assuming the reasons behind them. Like, why did she use wooden tongs instead of her hands to give us our bowls? This small action could be interpreted in many ways. Was it a sanitary custom, a presentation effect, or something else deeply routed in the Chinese society. Regardless, I didn't ask and just accepted it a part of the culture until I sat down and started writing.

My main take away from this experience is that of a deeper understanding and appreciation for the minor details of a different culture. From the greeting to the hospitality and many artifacts that helped define the people in the teashop; they all played a role in sharing a new way of experiencing life with me. I take away as many answers as I now have questions, and hope that I can do something like this in the near future.